

The Value of Democracy

In his monumental work “The Spirit of Laws”, the French philosopher Charles Montesquieu (1689-1755) observed that each form of government had a particular relationship with its citizens, and when that relationship changed, that form of government was in trouble.

In the case of despotism or dictatorship, the requirement is a constant state of fear among the people. When citizens are no longer afraid of their rulers, that form of government totters.

In the case of monarchy, Montesquieu noted that loyalty is on the part of people. When that loyalty wavers, the monarchy crumbles.

Democracy, Montesquieu says, is the most desirable form of government but also the most difficult to sustain, for its existence requires a virtuous people. When people are no longer virtuous, the republic falters. Why is that? Why is virtue a necessity in a free, democratic society and not in other forms of governments?

As Montesquieu noted, dictatorship enforces its rule by harsh techniques which nowadays include terrorism, secret police, brainwashing and other methods that keep citizens fearful and docile. At the other end of the governmental spectrum is a “free society”. A free society is not the one in which people do their own things anarchically. That would not be any society at all, but a jungle populated with savages. The accurate definition of a savage is a person who does personal things without regard to anyone else.

In a free, democratic society, the characteristic means of achieving cooperation is the voluntary observance, not of laws, but of informal codes of conduct. These codes are many, including moral commandments, professional ethics, social values, patriotism, integrity, incorruptibility, tolerance, truthfulness, fidelity, humanism, dedication, compassion, respect for one’s neighbour, giving a fair pay. This is simply an elaboration of Montesquieu’s comprehensive term “virtue”.

When these informal codes of conduct break down and a large number of citizens, in particular the prominent among them, revert to the savage inclinations of robbing, cheating, vandalising and disregarding the rights of others, citizens call upon the government to pass more and more laws, regulating the details of behaviour. New legions of inspectors and police must be mobilised, and the society in question moves along the spectrum from freedom towards a centrally regulated, bureaucratised and militarised despotism.

In the second chapter of Book Four of “The Spirit of Laws”, under the subheading “That Honour is not the Principle of Despotic Government”, Montesquieu writes: “Honour has its laws and rules. It can be found only in countries in which the constitution enjoys permanence and where the nations are governed by settled laws. Honour is a thing unknown in arbitrary governments”.

Montesquieu's clarity of perception can be of great help in addressing national problems. Unfortunately, many peoples do not have long standing traditions of abiding by the informal codes of conduct essential to democratic nations. The notions of self-restraint, self-reliance and self-sacrifice for the benefit of the whole nations are not imbedded in their cultures. Loyalties are restricted to tribes, religious sects and linguistic entities. It is very difficult for a one-person, one-vote regime to operate a political entity

made up of units of vast cultural diversity with no common acceptance of standards of civic virtue.

If democracy is to strike roots and blossom in many countries, peoples have to be imbued with all those informal codes of conduct which in the aggregate characterise Montesquieu's virtuous citizen. Furthermore, the process of socialisation and acculturation should be designed in such a way that the individual comes to perceive those informal codes of conduct not as burdens to be borne stoically but as ideals that provide a frame of reference within which democratic life is lived.

The human psyche is ill-equipped to withstand moral neutrality. If nothing is judged to be of great value, if nothing is worthy of sacrifice, there is no basis for a sense of pride and progress in one's life.

There is no reason to believe that some peoples are not capable of bringing about a breakthrough if others have been able to do so. The transition period is a period of chaos, intellectual and moral confusion. What is, therefore, required is a certain sharpness of vision and the courage to think in new ways to give one's life a new direction. Courage is needed to say that the guardians of old paradigms are no more than lackeys of the status quo, which has brought about all the calamities that are befalling peoples today.

All peoples should know that they are living in a new world. The awareness that a new world is possible unclogs things, opens the way to a freedom of choice, and to an ability to break with stereotyped thinking. Peoples can make miracles, provided they believe with the French philosopher Voltaire (1694-1778) who declared: "I do not agree with what you say, but I shall lay down my life for your right to say it". That is the essence of democracy. No one has a monopoly over truth. Truth is born in dialogue, and concrete as a weapon in the hands of the oppressed against the oppressors. Truth lies in recognising unity in diversity and humanism as the supreme value of democracy.

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